



NEWS RELEASE

Media Contact:

Greg Risling, Assistant Chief
Media Relations Division
213-257-2000
GRisling@da.lacounty.gov
Twitter: @LADAOOffice

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Gang Members Convicted of Killing Five People at Homeless Camp in Long Beach

Two gang members were found guilty today of murdering five people at a Long Beach homeless encampment in 2008, the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office announced.

Jurors deliberated for a day before convicting David Cruz Ponce, 36, and Max Eliseo Rafael, 31, of five counts of murder and one count of kidnapping. The jury also found true the special circumstance allegations of multiple murders, murder during a kidnapping and murder while the defendants were active participants in a criminal street gang.

Ponce also was found guilty of an additional count of murder and kidnapping and two counts of possession of a firearm by a felon.

Deputy District Attorney Cynthia Barnes of the Major Crimes Division prosecuted the case.

Ponce and Rafael fatally shot Lorenzo Villicana, Katherine Verdun, Hamid Shraifat, Frederick Neumeier and Vanessa Malaepule on Nov. 1, 2008. All five victims lived in a homeless encampment near an off ramp of the 405 freeway in Long Beach.

The two defendants talked about the murders in jailhouse conversations that were recorded, the prosecutor said.

Ponce also was convicted of the kidnapping and murder of Tony Bledsoe on March 23, 2009.

The death penalty phase for Ponce begins on Sept. 27. Rafael faces up to life in prison without the possibility of parole when he is scheduled to be sentenced Nov. 16.

Case BA392902 was investigated by the Long Beach Police Department and the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department.

About the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office

Los Angeles County District Attorney Jackie Lacey leads the largest local prosecutorial office in the nation. Her staff of nearly 1,000 attorneys, 300 investigators and 800 support staff members is dedicated to protecting our community through the fair and ethical pursuit of justice and the safeguarding of crime victims' rights.